



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Blackpentecostal Breath

Crawley, Ashon T.

Published by Fordham University Press

Crawley, T..

Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47612>

## CODA

### *Otherwise, Nothing*

Winds of 53 mph crashed against the lakeshore of Chicago for five days when October 29, 1929, arrived. It was fateful and fatal, indeed, but not simply for Chicago residents. Wall Street also felt its own tumult that day, the day marking Black Tuesday, the beginning of the Great Depression. Violent wind was blowing over and economically destabilizing the country, and Chicago was hit hard. Imagine, then, the resolve necessary to organize a choir during that fateful period in the face of such economic and ecological tumult. The First Church of Deliverance's choir, which would go on to international fame, held its first meeting that very day. Five years later, at 6:00 am in 1934, First Church of Deliverance aired their first radio broadcast, becoming the second radio broadcast of a "colored" congregation in Chicago. A few miles up the road in Evanston, Laurens Hammond was busily putting together the plans for a cheap organ that churches and novices could purchase. January 19, 1934, Hammond and his lawyers walked the patent to the office themselves, him promising that—during the economically disastrous period—he was ready to put hundreds of people to work, manufacturing the instrument that would come to bear his name. The patent was approved that very day and they went to work.

In 1939, music director for First Church of Deliverance, Kenneth Morris, conferred with Father Clarence Cobb in order to purchase one of those very new Hammond organs. "No church had had a Hammond organ prior to this, and people came from everywhere to hear First Church's revolutionary new instrument."<sup>1</sup> This idea, that First Church of Deliverance was the first church to purchase a Hammond organ would turn out to be a

rumor, a narrative the church tells about itself. Because of the radio broadcast that already garnered popular appeal by 1939, with the sounds of the Hammond organ, people came from far and wide to see what they experienced sonically: Just what was this instrument with its, at times, “human-like” voice?<sup>2</sup> “Cobb was able to attract to his congregation people from the ranks of the city’s black middle and even elite classes because of his flashy personal style and promises of prosperity, but it was the emotionally demonstrative worship of his live radio broadcasts that made him a ‘mass hero’ among Chicago’s poor and working class.”<sup>3</sup>

Though the rumor of First Church of Deliverance’s relation to the Hammond organ is important, there is a likewise rumor of blackqueer sociality that this particular church space served that interests me. “Former members of the First Church of Deliverance on Wabash Avenue remembered it as a major stop on the gay nightlife circuit in the 1930s and 1940s. The church welcomed gay people and Reverend Clarence Cobbs, along with many of his staff, was rumored to be gay,” and “After attending the live broadcast at the church, which ran from 11:00 pm to midnight, club goers would simply walk from First Church of Deliverance to one of the area nightspots, usually the Kitty Kat Club, the Parkside, or the 430.”<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the convergence of sound, subjectivity, and sexuality as a force of Blackpentecostalism would become a contentious, contestable debate. Blackqueerness was there, animating the social life of Blackpentecostal spiritual practice. As late as 1971, Anthony Heilbut wrote about how it was generally noted and accepted that “most immediately striking about many of the larger Holiness churches is the inordinate number of male and female homosexuals. As one singer bluntly put it, ‘There’s more sissies and bull daggers in the Sanctified churches, and they all think they’re the only ones going to Heaven.’” Heilbut otherwise noted, “The Holiness church maintains a discrete and at times impenetrable mystique. It may be the blackest of institutions . . .”<sup>5</sup> That there was a moment in which there was an acceptance, not necessarily of the “lifestyle,” but of the self-evidentiary nature of queerness inherent to Blackpentecostal aesthetic practice, that there was not a desire for violent removal and abatement, seems to me to illustrate the ways there was no theology-philosophy of queerness that could gather up and discard such aesthetics, such modes of life. It would not be until the theological-philosophical reduction of aesthetic force that such sociality would be figured as a problem for Blackpentecostal thought. Such that we might say

the sound of the Hammond B-3 in Blackpentecostal spaces emerged from a queer sociality, from underground and otherworldly friendships and erotic relationships. Were musicians visiting the church before going to the Kitty Kat down the street, then telling their pastors about this object and the way it moved congregants?

The Hammond B-3 organ, and its ubiquity in the Blackpentecostal tradition can move us in such a direction. This instrument is used in storefront churches in impoverished inner cities and in new, modern megachurches. The Hammond B-3 can be found in churches across the United States, in various countries in Africa, in England. It is a sound that has, in other words, spread. The Hammond B-3 organ has been taken up in Blackpentecostal spaces as the instrument, as the sound, of the movement. The Hammond B-3 organ's sound is an instance of blackqueer sonic presencing and enacts the politics of avoidance when the musician and instrument come together, sounding out in the space of congregations. The Hammond instrument is a "tonewheel organ," and tone wheels are "a system of spinning, steel, silver-dollar-sized" discs with "notched edges," resulting in "output [that] is more alive [and] organic . . . than what electronic organs can produce."<sup>6</sup> Though the Hammond instruments have sound presets that change the timbre and quality of the organ sound, there are also drawbars that allow musicians to instantly change and control sound quality. Drawbar settings affect the loudness, the tones, the percussiveness of the instrument. "By pulling or pushing their drawbars, you could instantly sculpt your sound. If you want more high harmonics, just tug on the upper drawbars. To deemphasize the fundamental, shove in the white drawbars."<sup>7</sup> The manufacturer warned against pulling out all the drawbars as a setting musicians should never use. However, in much Blackpentecostal performance with the B-3, particularly during moments of intense emotionality in church services, musicians often use that very setting, pulling out all the stops, so to speak, in order to be as voluminous as possible. Though Laurens Hammond had specific desires for the decorous use of the instrument, Blackpentecostal aesthetics not only obscured but popularized the unwanted. Drawbars "offer real-time control of the sound," and that real-time is generative for reconceptualizing temporality and spatiality, for thinking spacetime otherwise.<sup>8</sup>

To amplify the B-3 model, an external speaker cabinet has to be utilized. Though the Hammond Organ Company manufactured their own

model, it was Don Leslie and the Leslie Company that had the best “fit” for the sound the Hammond attempted to produce. “The most popular Leslie speaker cabinet contains a high-frequency horn driver and a bass woofer, both of which are combined with rotating components. . . . The rotary components can rotate at high and low speeds, which adjustable ramp-up and -down times.”<sup>9</sup> At the level of the machine itself, there is a necessarily sociality: for the machine to be heard, it necessitates some outside object to make the chord changes and progressions audible. Most fundamentally, the Hammond instrument differs from pipe organs because “the pipes themselves are spread out across a fairly wide range when constructed.”<sup>10</sup> Pipe organs, in other words, are fashioned by the amount of room they require from any given space. For this reason, there are no pipe organs in domestic spaces; one would need cathedral-like space for such an instrument. In contradistinction, the Hammond organ was able to be compact and, in a way, portable (at 400 or so pounds), such that the achievement of the Hammond organ with the attendant Leslie speaker, we might say, is spatiotemporal compression, about which more soon. As a substitute for the pipe organ—because of the drawbars, the Leslie speaker cabinet and the touch-to-response ratio—the Hammond’s “fast attack” made it a poor substitute,<sup>11</sup> but this failure, as its quick response to touch, would be its crowning achievement, making it perfect for the intense and quick “movement of the Spirit” in Blackpentecostal spaces.

The sound of the Hammond organ, particularly the B-3 model, would come to be the sound of Blackpentecostalism particularly and how the black church as an institution with historical force is imagined.<sup>12</sup> Described as sounding human, the Hammond organ offers a way to think about the breakdown between human and machines. Returning to Brother Steadfast’s testimony given at Reverend F. W. McGee’s Blackpentecostal church, January 28, 1930, him closing by asking for the Saints to pray “that I may be used as an instrument in his hand,” this desire for instrumentality, I argue, structures the Blackpentecostal imagination such that any object can be sacralized, made holy. People not only beat tambourines and stomp feet, but play washboards with spoons and blow whistles. The Hammond organ is in this tradition, the utilization of any object for sacred possibility. And in such making sacred of objects, the instrument is not the Hammond on the one hand or the musician on the other: the instrument is the sociality of the *spirit filled* musician with the musical object working together.

Being spirit filled breaks down the distinction, the categorical coherence of human and machine. This sociality of instrumentality is a respiratory performance. And fundamental to such an incoherence of human and machine is—like the aesthetic practices of whooping, shouting, noise-making and tongue-talking—the breath, black pneuma. The Hammond organ breathes on multiple levels: at the level of the musical object, the Leslie speaker gathers up and displaces the air within space in order for the object to be audible; it literally inhales and exhales air; it is, in other words, a breathing machine. The changes in speed of the Leslie speaker make such mechanical respiration audible; listen closely and you can hear the chop-chop-chop smooth out and speed up again. And on the level of the human and machine breathing together, what is it to be spirit filled? It is to be filled with breath, filled with air, filled with wind.

Given its prominence in the sound culture of America—heard not only in churches but in rock and roll, rhythm and blues, jazz, funk, soul—given its ubiquity, given the debates about authenticity and sound musicians have about the instrument, given the language used to describe its sounds, I want to consider the omission of the instrument from narrations and stories and analyses about black religiosity, music, and culture. Such omission seems to be audibly deafening, an aversive modality of thought, an aversion that is not unlike the racialized grounds for theology and philosophy. Is the aversion to discussing the instrument perhaps linked to its blackqueer origins within black sacred traditions? It remains to be explored if such is the case. But the proliferation of the sound of the Hammond B-3 in Blackpentecostal spaces emerged from a blackqueer sociality, from underground and otherworldly friendships and erotic relationships, so perhaps there is more there. Rumor and gossip about the queerness of musicians of these particular instruments within the space of the church abounds. There is, within this religiocultural space, a thinking together of the concepts of sound and sexuality.

Musician and critic Salim Washington offers that one way to think about sound in the Blackpentecostal tradition is as a technology: “Music in the Holiness churches can be used simply as a transformation of the mood and/or mind-set of the participants, but in the case of the ‘shout,’ music is used as a technology, through which a direct cause and effect takes place.”<sup>13</sup> Technologies can be used as outlined in user manuals or can be used otherwise to create otherwise moods, otherwise meanings,

with the same apparatus. The sound of the B-3 is ever present, and with the musician, complicates the generally accepted notion that Blackpentecostals are simply loud. The virtuosity of the musician allows us to overhear the dynamic nature of Blackpentecostal aesthetics. There are moments of quietude and others of cacophony, but always intense. The seeming omnipresence of the sound of the B-3 during church services, then, draws attention to what Avery Gordon calls the “seething presence” of all matters ghostly, the force of “the seemingly not there” that is perceptible, that is felt, that animates and is the foundation for movement, for behavior, for life and love.<sup>14</sup> The seemingly there and not there, faith as the substance of hope and as the evidence of things not seen—so the biblical book of Hebrews says—is on the edge. We wait and anticipate that something will happen, some mode of relationality enacted, some music played. I listen, I incline my ear towards the sounding and sounding out—from the first note to the last chord—of the B-3, “setting the atmosphere” for a particular kind of knowing, a certain modality for experiencing the world.

Attention to Blackpentecostal uses of the B-3 moves us further still by stopping short of Victor Zuckerkandl with his assertion that the dynamic quality of a tone is its will to completion.<sup>15</sup> What if tones weren’t reaching for resolution or completion but were perpetually, ongoingly, open? Whereas Zuckerkandl believes that notes resolve to completion, I argue that Blackpentecostal engagements with the Hammond B-3 make evident the centrifugitivity of black social life. What we have, in other words, are tones that are not simply moving toward resolution but are on the way to varied directionality—not simply in a linear, forward progression but also vertically, down and up, askance and askew. What if, as open to openness, the sounds of the B-3 prompt in its hearers an intellectual practice of a reaching toward the beyond? Would not this reaching, this movement toward without ever seizing the beyond, instantiate ongoing anticipatory posture, an affective mode of celebratory waiting?

Black being is first a question of anticipation, and I mean anticipation precisely as an observation prior to proper time, an occurrence in advance of expected time. Anticipation, black being, is a disruption of and a break with the standard, the proper, the expectation of time as linear, progressive, forward propulsive. As a concern about

being, about existence, the B-3's sonic thrownness—through the centripetal and centrifugal spins of tone wheels and drum speakers—whether reaching toward the high ceilings and spacious layout of formerly Jewish synagogues in neighborhoods like Newark, Detroit and Brooklyn or in the tight quarters and suffocating walls of storefront churches like those in which Helga Crane in *Quicksand* hearing congregants sing “Showers of Blessings,” or John, Elizabeth, and Gabriel in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* find themselves, allow us to reconsider the concept of origin.

In James Weldon Johnson's *The Books of Negro Spirituals*, Johnson outlines the ways in which the authorship of Spirituals was constantly queried: Just who came up with such musical genius; who authored such songs?<sup>16</sup> Implicit in such a question about authorship is the concern about ownership that is grounded in the textual, in a worldview wherein reading is coeval to literacy, and textual-grammatical literacy is the privileged mode of thought and communication. This question of authorship, in other words, emerged in the same world that touted reading as the privileged practice toward freedom. Thus, when Spirituals could be transcribed and written are the moments when concerns of authorship emerged as a concern with urgent force. But what at times is called “soft chording,” “padding,” “talk music” or—most intriguingly for me here—“nothing music” dislodges notions of authorship and genius as individuating and productive of enlightened, bourgeois, liberal subject from the capacity to create, to carry, to converge, to conceal.

“Nothing music”<sup>17</sup> is the connective tissue, the backgrounded sound, of Blackpentecostal church services heard before and after songs, while people are giving weekly announcements, before the preacher “tunes up” to whoop and after the service ends. Ask a musician, “what are you playing,” and—with a coy, shy smile—they'll say, “nothing.” Such musicked nothings are examples of what Samuel Delany says about the word: “The word generates no significant information until it is put in *formal relation* with something else.”<sup>18</sup> Delany argues that with the introduction of each new word in a sentence, it acts as a modifier of everything that came before; such that meaning is emergent, meaning is of and toward the horizon. Meaning is made through relationality such that what Delany says about words in a sentence is consistent with what Zuckerkandl contends about tones in a



sonic statement: to make meaning is to be in-between, in the interstice. But more, meaning is made through the inclined ear, through the anticipation of the *more to come* that *has not yet arrived*; this *more to come* is ever in relation to that which *is now* and that which has passed “*into the ago*,” as perhaps Heidegger would say. And we hear this in the musician’s virtuosity: they uphold, they carry, they anticipate, through the performance of “nothing.” “Nothing music” is not a song, nor predetermined melody. Perhaps *playing* is close to what I mean. The difference—musically—between playing “nothing” and improvisation, jamming or noodling is that perhaps with the playing of “nothing music,” there is a certain lack of attention, a sort of insouciance with which one plays, a holy nonchalance: being both fully engaged in the moment while concentration is otherwise than the music, a nonchalance that is part of, while setting, the mood of the church service. Playing as a performance of conviction that is not reduced to the serious, decorous or pursuit of perfection. Playing is to anticipate change.

In this playing of “nothing,” it is not that nothing is played, that nothing is heard; it is that what appears is the sound of the gift of unconcealment. Heidegger’s understanding of Being and Time, perhaps through the theorizing of a gift, is animated by a Blackpentecostal anticipation of a sonic sociality. Anticipation is a sort of Heideggerian gifting that always retains—in its enactment—its force of foresight, foreboding. Heidegger says, “the gift of unconcealing . . . is retained in the giving.”<sup>19</sup> Musicians unconceal—and uncompress—the play and the playing of nothing but retain, in the very playing out, the nothing from which the sounding out emanates. And when the drawbars are fully extended, perhaps we have a moment of “uncompression,” of decompression. What one hears, what one anticipates, with each new chord and arpeggio is the movement toward the next chord and arpeggio; one hears the meaning of “I ain’t got long to stay here,” what it means, in other words, to “steal away.” This is centrifugitive performance, criminal displacement of the concepts of genius and scholar because what these musicians play—and what we hear—they, and we, do not *know* though we certainly feel it, feel it pulling and tugging on us, at us, feel it attempting to move us toward some other mode of relationality.

from: a

to: a

Sunday November 29, 2009, 1:46am

Subject: . . .

mp,

I've gotta admit, I love the tendency in black gospel music to make any rhythmic song arrhythmic, to slow down standards so that the singer can play around and toy, tinker and trouble the structure. A mundane song gains new life by way of evacuating it of any such architectonics, yielding the song to a critique of normative modes of organization itself. 4/4 time and 3/4 time and 2/4 time become 0/4 time . . . or would it be 4/0 time, marking the possibility of infinite capacity for diffusion, difference, what Derrida might call that which structures differing and deferring, *différance*? Don't mind the faux-philosophical, opaque speak. Some shit I learned—rather, “learned” [yes, the scare quotes are necessary]—yesterday [or even still, more like, some shit I *read* that didn't make much sense to me at first read, so I copied and have been trying to think about it with the things that I know]. And I know I love how my own Aunt Janice would come to my church and how her “friend” Delores would play the organ for her. My Aunt Janice was queen of the arrhythmia that I'd hear in black pentecostal music. She'd take a song—something simple, a congregation song—like “This Is the Day”

*This is the day, this is the day / that the lord has made, that the Lord has made*

*I will rejoice, I will rejoice / and be glad in it, and be glad in it*

*This is the day that the Lord has made / I will rejoice and be glad in it*

*This is the day, this is the day / that the lord has made*

and whereas, during testimony service, we'd sing the song with the regular 4/4 structure, clapping on the two and four, my auntie would come sing during an afternoon service just before the preacher got up and she'd subject the entire song's structure to a melismatic critique. So you know how with melisma, instead of each note getting a syllable, one can sing multiple notes for one syllable of the song. So instead of saying *do-re-me-fa-so-la-ti-do* one would take the *do* and make it *do-oh-oh-oh-oooooh!* going up and down the scale. People like Kim Burrell or Darryl Coley, I suppose, are good examples.

My Aunt Janice would take that little testimony service, congregational song and sing it as a solo with Delores playing behind her. No rhythm. No structure. Rather, she built into the song ecstasy and

surprise by way of the tension and release. She'd get up and say something like

*ya'll pray for me, I'm hoarse, got a cold but god gets the glory on today.*

*I'm gonna sing . . . well . . . I'm gonna sing . . .*

and she'd pause while Delores would play "nothing music" behind her, filling in the gaps and pauses and breaths with sweet organ music that would allow Aunt Janice a moment to think because she literally would never know what she'd want to sing but would allow the flow of the service to determine her song choice and how she'd deliver it. Since this one time was right before the preacher and the service was sorta dry and she wanted to give the preacher something on which to hold that would allow his sermon to escalate more easily, I'm guessing at least, she went for something familiar only to hold up its familiarity to scrutiny, only to show us that that which we thought we knew was that which we didn't know at all. Removing the rhythm while using words that we all knew very, very well meant that the substance of the song had to be found otherwise, that we had to *get into it* by her delivery, by the style she used that was, at the same time, its essence. Singing that which we all knew in a way that we did not and could know meant that we were all on a journey—with my auntie—of discovery.

So after her pondering, she came upon—which is to say, she discovered already there—the possibility for the arrhythmic version of the song, which is really when you think about it, just another kind of rhythmic offering, rhythmic critique. Kinda like how all squares are rectangles but not all rectangles are squares. Some concepts have folded in them other concepts. Rhythm as regularity is just another way to be arrhythmic. Right? So my auntie would close her eyes right before the first word, after having looked over and nodded to Delores, Delores still playing the "nothing music" waiting for the first words, not knowing what auntie was going to sing. Of course, auntie chose a different key than the one in which Delores was playing her "nothing music," so she immediately ran her fingers up and down the white and black notes to catch up to auntie, but so skilled she was that it took her but a quick second and she was there, right behind auntie, filling in while also anticipating.

*Thi-ih-is . . . ih-ih-is oh oh oh oooh . . . the! day!*

Well, to try and recount the entire rendition through typed words would only be to falsify what actually occurred. The written word can't really approach what happened live. Not at all. You would have had to have heard it. But you can at least imagine her singing this Lord's song in a familiar land but differently. It's as if my auntie would reduce the song to its component parts, examining the truth of each word and breath and note and break. The hesitant approach, I learned when I was much older, made the weary sad eyes she had whenever she sang make much more sense.

I've since learned that her best friend and organist—indeed, that Delores—was her on again, off again partner who was convinced as hell that hell was her destination and so life became a living purgatory for them both. Their intimate connection we'd hear as auntie sang while Delores played was nothing other than a melancholy—but also the momentary irruptions of joy, peace, hope, love—they both endured on a daily basis. The possibility for their intimate music making is that very thing that broke down all sorts of ideas about what rhythm, tune and time could be for any song. Auntie would sing down the heavens and Delores would play the hell out of that organ until we all shouted a bit, even those who'd never danced and those who didn't want to; she might've been what she preached against but she also had something in her that she wanted to give us whenever she sat on that organ.

Delores, we'd say, was a good organist. She did not lead the song but followed politely behind. She did not dominate the song but, rather, influenced it. She did this by having all of the drawbars for the B-3 pushed in except the 8' and 4', which were pulled all the way out to 8 (loudest volume). She, of course, would have the 32' bass drawbar pulled all the way out. There is nothing more soothing than the combination of the soft of the keyboard with the low bottom of the heavy bass. Carrying. Carrying as caring. The bottom and bottoming out of the testimony and song. She'd keep her setting like this while auntie sang the first two lines of the song, following, as I said before, a bit behind. Like a kind friend being led by the hand into uncharted territory. But after the dance and choreography of voice and pedal, organ and song, Delores would feel more confident and auntie would be more herself, eyes open now, having taken the microphone off the stand and holding it in her hand, prepared to walk a bit as she sang.

Delores would then pull out the 13/5', 11/3' drawbars to about 4 and the 1' drawbar to about 2 in order to add vibrancy and bounce and color to the sound. Still following, but not as far behind now. Still polite but more knowing still. After auntie'd sing "has made" in her long, drawn-out, arrhythmic manner, Delores would play the most delightful *turn around* which is like the end and beginning converging, an intro and conclusion at the same encounter. She, of course, pushed all the drawbars back in again because auntie wanted to sing the same lines again from the beginning, leaving the 8' and 4' drawbars out but now exposing the 16' as well, moving her hands up an octave because the 16' necessitates this move.

I'm sure none of this makes sense to you and, even if it did, you don't care about drawbar settings but at least know that by the end of auntie's singing and Delores's playing, Delores would have exposed all of the drawbars pulled out to their fullest volume and the folks in the church would be up and loud and screaming in response *YEAH! YES! YESSAH! MMMMHMMMM!!!* and *MY MY MY* and other such things because of this song and dance auntie and Delores publicly engaged.

But you, of course and no doubt, are preoccupied with the curt but anything but simple question: Why? Why does any of this matter? And why linger in such a mundane conversation as drawbar settings and lesbians who cry and curse and feign coughs when called upon to sing? This is, at least in my mind, the very question that you allowed to pre-occupy you so much so that you never gave way to, or a way for, experience. You never could or would and never felt you should believe me when I'd exclaim your beauty, your brilliance. Of course, this is why you improvisationally asked me over and over again if I really actually thought that, if I believed it. You were beguiling, cunning, creative with the same query asked over and over again repetitiously until I too questioned if I meant it.

*So why is it you like me*

*What is it you see in me*

*Do you really like me*

*Once someone comes around who really interests you, you'll leave me*

*You don't know anything about me*

*So what do you like about me*

*What things do you find attractive in me*

*I am not beautiful*

None of these were questions, even if some appear at first blush to be. The problem, of course, is that you considered beauty to be kinesthetic, the project of movement that has been enacted and since you had the annoying tendency to deem your actions impotent, you thought the only beauty in you that others could possibly see a farce.

To me, beauty is not kinesthetic but rather potential. It is about the set of capacities to move *toward* movement that others, quite literally, sense. And I mean *sense* in its most profound and quotidian resonance, I mean taste and touch and smell and sound and sight. Your beauty, at least in the ways I detected it, was not wrapped up in what you've done [or, really, not done] but in the possibilities of discovering worlds together. This was the beauty of Delores's playing behind and with my auntie: the possibility for discovering, for happening upon something, for invention and improvisation. But my auntie's breaking the song into components also sounded out a similar concern that you'd announce each time you'd ask me the same question differently. She did not believe the words she was singing, so she exposed them to newness and revisement to see—maybe hear?—something *in* them that would betray some truth. She wanted the kinesthesia of the words rather than live in their potential. The funny thing is, the congregation *got* it, they felt the potential and praised accordingly. But for auntie and Delores, the potential was simply not enough, they needed some action, some movement.

But, of course when I think about it now, kinesthesia and *potentia* are not that different. Or, rather, they are both constructed from our social worlds and just like silence does not ever exist outside of a desire for it, and just like emptiness [of jugs, for example] is a ruse [a jug that is empty, Heidegger would say, is full with all the mixed properties that make air; to proclaim it empty is really to say that air is “nothing” but we know that this is not the case], so too is *potentia* a kind of movement [and likely that kinesthesia is also *potentia* with *différance*]. I mean, everything is always moving, in a state of flux. So even the notion of potential does not fully encapsulate the ways in which *potentia* is a form of movement. It is the motion of possibility, it is the stirring up [the gift? was I Paul to your Timothy?] of occasion, it is the flow of withholding.

What I mean is that *potentia* for me makes visible and audible the anticipatory nature of hearing. What we'd hear in auntie's announcement of a cold? The possibility for failure and not just of the song, even if not primarily the song, but the possibility for failure to produce the holy, sanctified and set apart subject deemed necessary for singing the Lord's song. What we'd hear in the first, hesitant, melismatic word *this* that she'd sing? The stirring up of a world of holy trouble. We knew, with that word, that the power of the Lord was sure to come down. The surprise would be in how we got there, not in the fact of us getting there because there was determined as achievable and achieved before she began. My auntie doesn't sing much these days and isn't invited out much either. Delores still plays, thankfully but they are rarely seen together from what I understand. Both of them got "delivered." Too bad they're no longer saved.

*in potentia,*

a.

HELGA CRANE WAS ON the search for something. She spent the majority of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*<sup>20</sup> trying to understand something about life, about love, something about a material-spiritual way to be in the world. Her being Other that was also, only and always her blackness, sent her on various migrations, both in the United States and internationally. Tennessee, Chicago, Harlem. She also traveled to Denmark where at first she felt relief. But soon after such relief, she felt she had become, to use Frantz Fanon, an object in the eyes of the Danes. Crane returned to the States, to Harlem specifically, because she missed the faces of, and comfort from, black folks who did not make her feel like an objection, like a question, like a problem.

One might say that she was on a journey, that Crane was committed to a general, *nonsecular* agnosticism that was at the same time the refusal of the *secular* western philosophical construction of atheistic stance that purports, in the most robust sense, the impossibility of further discovery for an object. What moves me about Crane is her continual dissatisfaction with the world as she knew it; her peregrinations were seeking for a fullness that she did not, and most certainly *could not* know existed previous to its discovery. But this lack of knowledge was not the occasion for a refusal to journey, nor a declaration of the nonexistence of such fulfillment. And

that journey, from the US South to Chicago to Harlem to Denmark back to Harlem paused, if only momentarily, as she fell into the warmth and acoustic embrace of a storefront church:

[Helga Crane] had opened the door and entered before she was aware that, inside, people were singing a song which she was conscious of having heard years ago—hundreds of years it seemed. Repeated over and over, she made out the words:

. . . Showers of blessings,  
Showers of blessings . . .

She was conscious too of a hundred pairs of eyes upon her as she stood there, drenched, disheveled, at the door of this improvised meeting-house . . . The appropriateness of the song, with its constant reference to showers, the ridiculousness of herself in such surroundings, was too much for Helga Crane's frayed nerves. She sat down on the floor, a dripping heap, and laughed and laughed and laughed. It was into a shocked silence that she laughed.<sup>21</sup> . . .

There were, it appeared, endless moaning verses. Behind Helga a woman had begun to cry audibly, and soon, somewhere else, another. . . .

Helga too began to weep, at first silently, softly; then with great racking sobs. Her nerves were so torn, so aching, her body so wet, so cold! It was a relief to cry unrestrainedly, and she gave herself freely to soothing tears, not noticing that the groaning and sobbing of those about her had increased, unaware that the grotesque ebony figure at her side had begun gently to pat her arm to the rhythm of the singing and to croon softly: 'Yes, chile, yes, chile.' Nor did she notice the furtive glances that the man on her other side cast at her between his fervent shouts of 'Amen!' and 'Praise God for a sinner!'

She did notice, though, that the tempo, that atmosphere of the place, had changed, and gradually she ceased to weep and gave her attention to what was happening about her. . . . And as Helga watched and listened, gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about.<sup>22</sup>

She stumbled into a storefront church and into radical possibility that was opened to her by way of sound, intensity, fervor. Crane was always



on the move, she continually found herself in spaces, seeking fulfillment, constantly moving but never settling, always willing to begin to search anew. She is the enfleshment of the material condition that “no finite or conditioned reality can claim to have reached its destiny” and her movements were always in the direction of a sociality.<sup>23</sup> Helga Crane’s movements prompt the question: What is art? And, attendant, how is the storefront the production of art, the production of aesthetic practice?

Crane entered the church because, literally, it was serving as a refuge from the rainstorm occurring outdoors. It was there, in the community, open, serving its own purpose previous to her arrival: folks were there, praising there, singing there, joyous there, tarrying there, enacting radical sociality against the grain of sociological projects that would so have a constrained understanding of negro storefront Black-pentecostal churches as “Cults,” as E. Franklin Frazier would describe them.<sup>24</sup> Crane entered the church because she didn’t want to be wet any longer, wanted to dry off and calm her nerves. The materiality of the building was likewise a dwelling, open. There was no belief necessary for such material inhabitation. Belief is not what prompted her desire to be in the storefront, but a recognition of the conditions of the life she lived. Still, something happened.

Stumbling into the space, the sonic environment made a claim on her. The voices sang to her, the bodies came to her. The movement of sound, flesh, spirit. Falling on the ground, wet, she laughed. Somewhere between laughs, her engagement became serious. Her initial posture allowed her to listen, and listening opened to experience. The sounds of people singing, praying, praising—the sounds, generally, of the inspiring and expiring of breath, inhaling and exhaling, the aestheticizing of breathing in that tight, constrained space of the storefront—produced a bass, a bottom, a foundation upon which she could be carried. There was a resonance of the sounds, of the voices. She heard them. She inhabited them. She was, literally, covered—by sounds, by flesh—and we might say that this covering also was the refuge, at least at that temporal moment. And perhaps refuge is only ever temporal, only ever something that is carried and enacted rather than a place and a time. She sought and found it without having known it. She did not merely open up the church door but she allowed herself to be open to that which she

heard, to what she felt. It was, for her, a terrifyingly joyful experience. The moment was of the dance and play of spirit, the choreosonic play of black sociality.

TONI MORRISON HAS written about *playing* in the dark, how there is an Africanist presence in American literature;<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler began her discussion of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* by bespeaking how kids *play* and in such playing get in trouble;<sup>26</sup> So what is the relationship of play to presence, of play to performativity, that the organist, that the organ itself, furnishes forward for our consideration? To uphold, to carry, and to anticipate and move. These musicians organize sound in space in such a way as to produce three-dimensionality. Aden Evens would, I think, agree:

Every sound interacts with all the vibrations already present in the surrounding space; the sound, the total timbre of an instrument is never just that instrument, but that instrument in concert with all the other vibrations in the room, other instruments, the creaking of chairs, even the constant, barely perceptible motion of the air.<sup>27</sup>

They are playing the air, gettin' down with the handclaps, getting' into trouble with the talking preacher, they gather the varied vibrations and channel them out through the sound of the B-3. But the thing they play, the thing with which they move congregants, is chord changes of nothing, the breaking of unconcealment to concealment. The musicians construct a narrative about and from nothing, through the available air compression and changes in the environment. No tone is excess, no harmony too egregious; each allows for discovery. If the presence that figures itself as "nothing" has the ability to move, to undergird, what does this mean about the status of the claim for being, for coming from, nothing? Perhaps lacking spatial and temporal coherence is a gift. It is to anticipate that there is, even in nothing, a multitude, a plentitude, a social world of exploration.

Nothing is *really* distinguishable between 1.1 and 1.2 unless we slip down between the crack of these two seemingly close numbers with the Density of Rational Numbers rule, that between any two rational numbers is a world of difference. Such that between any two rational distinct numbers,  $a$  and  $b$ , there is a rational number  $p$  such that

$a < p < b$

1.1—1.2

1.1, 1.11—1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111—1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111—1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111—1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111—1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111, 1.1111111—1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111, 1.1111111, 1.11111111—1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111, 1.1111111, 1.11111111, 1.111111111—1.2

Aden Evens says, “To hear a chord instead of isolated notes, to hear a progression instead of a bunch of chords is to hear the implicated.”<sup>28</sup> What is implicated at the outer limits of 1.1 and 1.2 is the anticipation for a gettin down and diggin’ deep, a movement away from the surface of things wherein one discovers a world ready for exploration. Even on a page, we detect a space made. Like Helga Crane, one only discovers movement by a momentary pause and rupture, by opening oneself up to the possibility of an otherwise. “To hear a pitch that does not change is to hear as constant something that is nothing but change, up-and-down motion. To hear is to hear difference.”<sup>29</sup> If what one hears is difference itself, then what one anticipates is the means through which difference shows itself, the routes through which difference announces itself, not as a moment for denigration but as a showing, as an appearance, worthy of celebration, praise. And this difference that is felt, that is heard, through anticipation, calls forth a sociality.

The sound of the B-3 participates in a relationship with the other sounds in the space, that the musician enacts—along with the architectonics, the noise and murmuring, the conversations and glossolalia, the foot stomps and vocable expirations—and this participation is the horizontal emergence for, and the grounds of, blackqueer relationality, Foucault’s friendship as a way of life, an inventional A thru Z mode of coming together in otherwise, uncapturable, anti-institutional configurations with each

sounded out chord.<sup>30</sup> What is desired from the playing of chords, I think, is to have the congregants scream in ecstasy, to yelp in pleasure, because of the anticipated but unexpected, anticipation as surprise and astonishment. What the sound of the B-3 lets us hear, then, is that Blackpentecostal aesthetics, black pneuma, the politics of avoidance, are all illustrative of the anoriginal density, uncompressed compression, that is fundamental to any creative practice, any form of life.

